

RECENT SIGHTINGS OF RED-HEADED FALCON *FALCO CHIQUERA* FROM KERALA

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Red-headed Falcon, variously known as Red-necked Falcon or Red-headed Merlin, is a mid-sized falcon considered as a widespread resident in India. Though three races are known to exist in the world, it has been suggested that the regional variant of South Asia be better treated as a separate species (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). It is known to prefer open plains and deserts with sparse vegetation and scattered trees, sometimes close to villages and cities. It is probably resident in most parts of its range, studies in Africa has shown that it may breed outside of its normal range in response to changes in prey abundance. (Malherbe 1963). Though the bird is considered widespread in peninsular India (Grimmet et. al. 2005), it is extremely scarce in Kerala with just two prior records, one of them historical (Sashikumar et. al. in prep) and hence has not been included in the official checklist of Kerala (Sashikumar et.al. 2009). A specimen was collected from Kavassery, Palakkad district by K.K.Neelakantan (Neelakantan 1960) and much later an adult bird sighted from Anaikatty in December 2000 by Manoj V Nair (Sashikumar et. al. in prep). This note describes two sightings from Kerala in 2010 which confirms its presence inside political limits of Kerala, perhaps as a rare straggler.

One of us (PES) saw a lone Red-headed Falcon from Adat Kole wetlands in Thrissur district on 30.x.2010 at 16:00hrs. The bird was seen in flight over an open paddy field, where a few Eastern Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* were feeding. Later the bird perched in thick foliage of a nearby tree along bund road at a height of about 5m. Bird was observed for more than 15 mins and photographs taken (Fig 1). The rufous crown & long wings extending near to the tail were quite noticeable. Later the bird flew from its perch again into the wet fields. It didn't gain any considerable height, but flew with rapid wing beats & then glided along its way. Back from field, identification from the photograph was confirmed after consultation with other bird-watchers.

The second sighting was made by one of us (AS) from Punchakkari paddy fields, Thiruvananthapuram district during the Kerala Bird Race on 14.xi.2010. The main habitat of this area is marshes with a few acacia trees on one side of the road, and uncultivated fields on the other side. The team Osprey consisting of Jayaprakash, Ratheesh, Kiran, Gautham, Aravind apart from the second author saw a falcon which flew in a straight line into a group of fifteen Grey Wagtails *Motacilla cineria* which were circling over the road. The falcon also circled a few times with the Wagtail group, but did not catch any bird. It then flew away, leaving the wagtail group in disarray. The falcon, which was of the size of a Shikra had brick-red crown and nape, pure white throat without streaking, dull white breast with a few streaks and rest of under parts with more streaking, black band near the end of tail, upper parts uniform grey with black primaries & black tail band. No photographs could be taken but the bird was sketched in the field (Fig 2) and the description fits well with Red-headed Falcon.

This back-to-back sighting of this species from wetlands with in a span of 15 days indicates that the species might be sporadically visiting our wetlands and regular visits might throw up more sightings.

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Fig.1. Red-headed Falcon

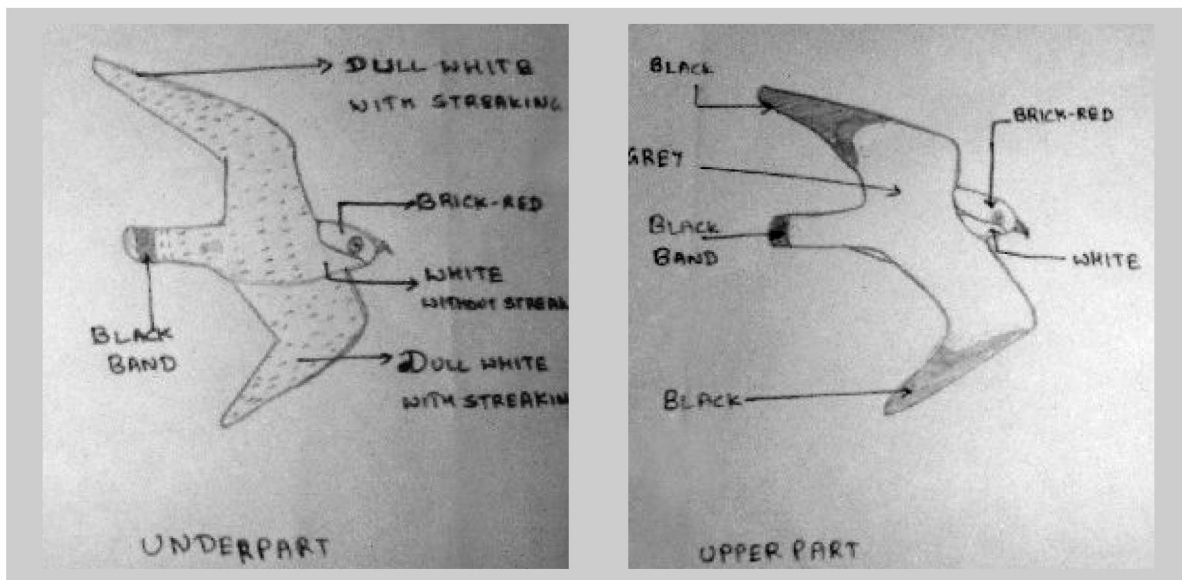


Fig. 2. Sketches of Red-headed Falcon in flight